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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

Publishers, Booksellers and Librarians: A Partnership?

by **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)
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*I*n recent weeks, various forms of the word *partner* have been mentioned in describing the relationships between and among publishers, booksellers and libraries. Is it really helpful to use that analogy? Our opinion is that cooperation among these constituencies is essential to the survival of each but that a cooperative, educational model is a better approach than partnership.

Dictionary definitions of *partner* as it relates to a business association mention such phrases as "joint rights and responsibilities," "joint ventures" or "sharing risks and responsibilities." Partners share information, develop common goals, and establish long range plans. When you call yourselves partners, you have to act like partners and that includes sharing power and decision making responsibilities. It is difficult to relate these concepts to a "partnership" of librarians, booksellers and publishers.

When one uses an analogy, the assumption is made that because some similarities exist between the concepts being compared, all others follow. While publishers, booksellers, and librarians are all involved in the provision of information to society, each one has differences that are basic, intrinsic, and sometimes deeply dividing the three groups.

Although the profit motive is shared by publishers and booksellers, it is not a concern of librarians except in a negative sense when publishers' profits are perceived to be excessive. Librarians purchase information for the specific purpose of facilitating multiple use. This goal reduces

the cost per use, but represents a loss of potential revenue to some publishers who do not consider libraries to be their market.

Booksellers and librarians are customers of the publishers, sharing common concerns related to the delivery of information. However, booksellers and librarians also exist in a seller-customer relationship. Booksellers offer various services for sale to libraries. Librarians purchase these services by issuing orders for library materials to the booksellers. It can look and feel like a partnership sometimes, but it isn't because the customer (the librarian) is always the powerful one in this type of relationship. The publisher's power lies in the monopoly that is supported by the copyright law. Booksellers gain power by offering services that individual libraries cannot afford through their own personnel budgets but can afford as a value added to the materials they purchase.

Librarians are motivated by getting the most amount of information (books, journals, other data) for the least amount of money. Booksellers are motivated by providing the least amount of information, services, or data that the market will allow for the most amount of money. The market (librarians) dictates over time what that minimum is. Although good companies (or rather smart companies) recognize that providing more services has a cost, they can sell these services at a price above that cost as "value added" services. This concept precludes a partnership, because adding value allows the vendor to charge more, and hopefully proportionally more, for that added service.

An example is a publisher's hardcover title versus a paperback edition. We all know that hardcover books cost a lot more than paperbacks (same title), and they cost a lot more than just the value of the binding. Why? Because the vendor, in this case the publisher, adds to the value of the book not only for the raw cost of the binding, but the value of the time and trouble the library would have to incur to bind a paperback to the same quality standard. So the publisher's \$40 hardcover includes a higher quality binding, sewn signatures, deeper gutters that the rebound \$15 paperback. It also includes immediate availability of the book, the labor cost of sending and receiving bindery shipments, the cost of those shipments, and some additional money for convenience. That is the value added surcharge, and if this were a partnering relationship, the surcharge would be shared or dispensed with.

There are some issues where cooperation is possible because of mutual benefits to all parties involved, and we should all work diligently toward those ends. There is a strong motivation for booksellers and librarians to develop close ties, to work for a collegial relationship to provide mutual benefits. But cooperation is not partnership, even when the results of cooperation benefit both parties. Educating ourselves about the commonalities and differences among us is vitally important to the common goal of providing information to society. There is also much to be gained from respecting the differences and acknowledging the professional responsibilities inherent in representing each constituency.